

Message Text

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ACTION SS-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SSO-00 NSCE-00 /026 W
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O 241404Z JAN 76

FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5991

INFO AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA NIACT IMMEDIATE

AMCONSUL ASMARA NIACT IMMEDIATE

AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMEMBASSY JIDDA

AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM NIACT IMMEDIATE

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY ROME

S E C R E T DAMASCUS 0414

EXDIS

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (TEXT)

EO 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINS, SY

SUBJECT: MEETING WITH PLF LEADER OSMAN SABBE

REF: STATE 12773, DAMASCUS 0405

1. SUMMARY: EMBOFF MET WITH PLF LEADER OSMAN SABBE
FOR 45 MINUTES MORNING JAN 24. SABBE STATED
MICHALKE BEING HELD BY ELF AND THAT ELF LEADER
AHMAD NASSIR HAD SENT CABLE TO ERITREA REQUESTING
HIS RELEASE. CAMPBELL AND HARRELL ALRIGHT ACCORDING
TO LETTER HE RECEIVED FROM CAPTORS TWO WEEKS AGO.
SABBE SAID HE UNDERSTOOD U.S. AS "GREAT POWER WITH
GLOBAL INTERESTS" WOULD NOT YIELD UNDER "DURESS", STATED
INFO IN AP ARTICLE CORRECT THAT HE NEGOTIATING WITH
PLF FIELD MILITARY COMMANDERS FOR RELEASE ALL
FOREIGN PRISONERS UNCONDITIONALLY. URGED USG NOT YIELD TO
CONDITIONS STIPULATED BY MILITARY COMMANDERS AND
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THAT USG NOT CONTACT THEM. ASSERTED PRISONERS BEING

USED AS BARGAINING COUNTERS IN POWER STRUGGLE WITHIN ERITREAN MOVEMENT. SABBE SAID HE ORDERED CUT OFF IN SUPPLIES TO PLF MILITARY COMMANDERS TWO MONTHS AGO TO PRESSURE THEM INTO RELEASING CAPTIVES. SYRIA HAS ALSO REQUESTED RELEASE OF CAPTIVES. SABBE SENDING PLF DELEGATION TO ERITREA JAN 30, OF WHICH SOME MEMBERS WILL BE CHARGED WITH OBTAINING RELEASE OF PRISONERS. END SUMMARY.

2. EMBOFF MET WITH OSMAN SABBE FOR 45 MINUTES MORNING JANUARY 24 AT SEMIRAMIS HOTEL DAMASCUS FOLLOWING PHONE CALL FROM SYRIAN INTERMEDIARY EVENING JAN 23 THAT MEETING SET UP. SYRIAN INTERMEDIARY CAME AND INTRODUCED SABBE TO EMBOFF, THEN DEPARTED LEAVING SABBE AND EMBOFF ALONE TO TALK.

3. SABBE SAID HE HAD JUST COME FROM MEETING WITH ELF LEADERSHIP AND HAD BEEN BUSY PAST FEW DAYS WITH "INTERNAL MATTERS." SAID ELF/PLF UNIFICATION EFFORTS MAKING PROGRESS, AND PROMISED TO SEND TO EMBOFF MATERIAL RE THESE EFFORTS. STATED HE HOPED ERITREAN CONGRESS WOULD BE HELD WITHIN ERITEREA "THIS YEAR." NOTED THAT MEETING IN DAMASCUS (DAMASCUS 0292) INVOLVED PLF REPS ONLY. MOST SIGNIFICANT RESULT WAS AUTHORIZATION FOR PLF DELEGATION COMPOSED OF SEVEN INDIVIDUALS TO VISIT ERITREA TO NEGOTIATE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PLF POLITICAL AND MILITARY LEADERSHIP, INCLUDING RELEASE OF ALL RPT ALL CAPTIVES INCLUDING TWO TAIWANESE, ONE BRIT, ONE ITALIAN, AND "FOUR AMERICANS" (NOTE: HE CLAIMED PLF HOLDING FOUR AMERICANS AND PROMISED PASS ALONG THEIR NAMES). NOTED RELEASE OF TWO AMERICANS BY ELF, CLAIMED ELF HOLDING MICHALKE AND THAT ELF LEADER AHMAD NASSIR HAD FEW DAYS AGO CALBED HIS COLLEAGUES IN ERITREA TO RELEASE MICHALKE.

4. SABBE SAID HE RECEIVED LETTER TWO WEEKS AGO FROM CAPTORS CAMPBELL AND HARRELL NOTING EHY IN GOOD CONDITION. HE ALSO HAD TALKED WITH PLF PARIS REP NAFI KURDI, WHO HAD REPORTEDLY TALKED WITH TWO CAPTIVES. HE CLAIMED THEY HAVE BEEN GIVEN BEER AND CIGARETTES

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FROM SUDAN, "ERITREAN MACARONI," LISTEN TO RADIO AND TALK WITH ENGLISH-SPEAKING ERITREAN STUDENTS FROM KHARTOUM UNIVERSITY (NOTE: IT IS POSSIBLE BASED ON THIS INFO AND BOWIDOWICZ/STRICKLAND DEBRIEFING THAT CAMPBELL AND HARRELL ALSO BEING HELD RELATIVELY NEAR SUDANESE BORDER). EMBOFF REFERRED TO FAVORABLE PUBLICITY GENERATED BY BOWIDOWICZ/STRICKLAND RELEASE, PASSED SABBE TEXT OF THEIR STATEMENT, GAVE HIM LETTER

FROM LEN CAMPBELL (STATE 011610), STRESSED THAT RELUCTANCE PLF RELEASE TWO CAPTIVES NOT AIDING THEIR CAUSE, AND STRONGLY URGED RELEASE ALL THREE CAPTIVES IMMEDIATELY WITHOUT CONDITION, NOTING THAT DEC 30 AP ARTICLE (BEIRUT 0341, 75 ADDIS ABABA 14968) SEEMED TO INDICATE CONDITIONS FOR THEIR RELEASE DROPPED.

5. SABBE RESPONDED THAT HE WOULD SHORTLY SEND LETTER TO EMBASSY FOR TRANSMITTAL TO MR. CAMPBELL. SABBE SAID AP ARTICLE "TRUE", ADDED HE HAD PASSED IT TO HIS AP CONTACTS WITH WHOM HE ENJOYS SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP. HE CLAIMED TO REALIZE FACT US AS "GREAT POWER WITH GLOBAL INTERESTS", WOULD NOT RELENT TO PLF DEMANDS "UNDER DURESS," AND THAT HE TRYING CONVINCE HIS MILITARY COLLEAGUES IN FIELD TO RELEASE ALL FOREIGN CAPTIVES AND DESIST FROM KIDNAPPING FOREIGNERS IN FUTURE. HE SAID USG SHOULD NOT YIELD TO THEIR DEMANDS AND SHOULD NOT INITIATE ANY CONTACTS WITH THEM. HE ASSERTED THAT INTERNAL PLF POWER STRUGGLE UNDERWAY, THAT MILITARY COMMANDERS USING CAPTIVES AS BARGAINING COUNTERS VIS-A-VIS PLF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP. BUT POLITICAL LEADERSHIP HAD UPPER HAND, HE CLAIMED, BECAUSE MILITARY DEPENDED UPON OUTSIDE SUPPLIES AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP BACKED BY "FOREIGN STATES WHO SUPPLY WEAPONS, MEDICINE AND MONEY". IN LETTER HE RECEIVED TWO WEEKS AGO (PARA 4) MILITARY COLLEAGUES AGREED TO RELEASE CAPTIVES IF CERTAIN CONDITIONS MET. HE SAID THEY WANTED USG STATEMENT AGREEING TO TERMINATE MILITARY AID TO ETHIOPIAN GOVT. EMBOFF INTERJECTED THIS STRICTLY USG-GOE MATTER, AND SABBE AGREED. SABBE SAID HE ORDERED CUTOFF OF SUPPLIES TO FIELD TWO MONTHS AGO. SAID HE "HOPEFUL" CAPTIVES WILL BE RELEASED IN SUDAN OR SAUDI ARABIA "SOON,"

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BUT COULD GIVE NO RELIABLE TIME FRAME.

6. SABBE ASSERTED THAT SAUDI ARABIA, SYRIA AND SUDAN PRESSING ERITREANS TO RELEASE CAPTIVES. BAATH PARTY NATIONAL COMMAND DIRECTOR FOREIGN RELATIONS, FAWWAZ SAYYAGH, AND EFMIN MUSTAFA TLAS IN SEPARATE MEETINGS PAST WEEK URGED SABBE TO EFFECT RELEASE OF CAPTIVES.

7. CONVERSATION CONDUCTED ENTIRELY IN ENGLISH, ALTHOUGH SABBE SPEAKS ARABIC. HE LOOKS 35 BUT CLAIMS TO BE 45. WEARS GLASSES AND CLAIMED TO BE HAVING EYE PROBLEMS. IS MARRIED TO RELATIVE OF SYRIAN PRIMIN AYYUBI, AND HAS WRITTEN BOOK ON ERITREA IN ARABIC WHICH NOW BEING TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH. PROMISED TO PASS ALONG COPY.

MURPHY

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